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Draft report

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Addendum

Programme questions

Programme performance of the United Nations for the biennium 1996-1997

1. At its 19th and 20th meetings, on 16 and 17 June 1998, the Committee considered the report of the Secretary-General on the programme performance of the United Nations for the biennium 1996-1997 (A/53/122 and Add.1).

2. A representative of the Secretary-General introduced the report and responded to queries raised during the Committee's consideration of the report.

A. Discussion

3. Concerns were expressed over the late submission of the report. It was recalled that in accordance with regulation 6.3 of the Regulations and Rules Governing Programme Planning, the Programme Aspects of the Budget, the Monitoring of Implementation and the Methods of Evaluation, the programme performance report should have been submitted to all Member States by the end of the first quarter following the completion of the biennial budget period.

4. Appreciation was expressed regarding the quality of the report and its analytical approach to discerning the meaning of the vast amount of data collected. Appreciation was also expressed for the innovative approach by the Secretariat of reviewing the programme performance in the context of the medium-term plan. In that regard, it was stated that it would be useful if future programme performance reports included an analysis of the plan in force with clearer references to changes that were introduced in previous plans. The view was expressed that the criteria for performance rating was not clear; sometimes reference

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was made to the number of work-months, but the quality was not measured. In view of the continuous nature of most United Nations activities, the view was expressed that such an analysis could provide a better picture of the trends in the patterns of implementation over a number of years and might be used to project expected performance during the next medium-term plan, covering the period 2002-2005.

5. Views were expressed on the high overall rate of implementation of 80 per cent. The improvement in productivity was welcomed, particularly in the delivery of parliamentary services, and the programme managers and staff were commended on realizing a high rate of implementation during a period of profound change for the Organization, which was characterized by severe budgetary constraints and continuous reform efforts. The view was expressed that there was no evidence that the process of reform and restructuring had affected overall implementation in terms of quantity of outputs delivered during the period under consideration. However, concerns were expressed as well that implementation may have been achieved at the expense of quality and that the total number of outputs programmed had steadily declined over the period of the medium-term plan for the period 1992-1997. It was also stated that the report did not contain information that would confirm that view. In that regard, it was also noted that there were significant variations among programmes in terms of implementation. Concern was raised that some sections were given exceptional and preferential treatment regarding the reductions called for in General Assembly resolution 50/214 of 23 December 1995. The view was expressed that even in some sections that suffered from the resource constraints, equal treatment was not followed and priorities were shifted without informing the General Assembly and getting its prior approval. Concerns were expressed regarding paragraph 16 of the report (A/53/122), which indicated that more than two thirds of terminated programmes occurred in the five regional commissions, the United Nations Environment Programme, the United Nations Centre for Human Settlements (Habitat) and the Department of Humanitarian Affairs combined.

6. Support was expressed for the proposal in paragraph 61 of the report to revisit the financial rules to ensure that they provide programme managers with the needed flexibility to enable them to discharge their responsibilities and that this should be accompanied by greater delegation of authority to manage the human as well as the financial resources. The view was expressed that the delegation of authority should be contingent on an effective system of internal control and programme oversight.

7. Concern was expressed on the termination of outputs as a result of the reductions in resources called for in General Assembly resolution 50/214. It was recalled that the Assembly, in part II, paragraph 6, of the resolution, had decided that the proposed savings would not affect the full implementation of mandated programme activities. The view was expressed that resource constraints were identified as the main cause of low performance rates, but the role of programme managers in producing performance rates was not examined. The view was expressed that the 14 per cent shortfall in implementation reported as a result of the savings measures reflected the direct impact only, and that the indirect effects were much higher if the vacancies resulting from resolution 50/214 were taken into consideration, and bearing in mind that 52 per cent of the non-implemented outputs fell under high-priority subprogrammes. The view was expressed that the savings measures had not been approved by the General Assembly but had been called for in resolution 50/214 pending the consideration and approval of the Secretary-General in his report on it, but nevertheless, the Secretary-General proceeded to implement the measures. The view was also expressed that the impact of savings measures seemed to have been concentrated in some budget sections. Some areas in the economic and social development sphere seemed to have suffered more than other areas of the budget. For example, as pointed out in paragraph 17 of the

report, the five regional commissions accounted for 70 per cent of the outputs terminated as a result of resolution 50/214.

8. The view was expressed that the managerial and administrative reforms that had been under way for most of the biennium and that aimed at improving management by establishing a system of responsibility and accountability throughout the Organization could be expected to mitigate and in part offset the negative effects of the implementation of resolution 50/214.

9. Concern was voiced regarding the average vacancy rate of 13 per cent and the much higher rates in some sections, which far exceeded the 6.4 per cent rate approved by the General Assembly. There was acknowledgement that the high vacancy rates did not seem to have negatively affected programme performance. There was, however, concern about the use of vacant posts for consultancies and short-term appointments. The view was expressed that the practice of recruiting consultants was not an adequate remedy for lengthy and cumbersome recruitment procedures in the Organization. In view of this, it was also stated that productivity could be increased even further if the recruitment process and other cumbersome administrative procedures were streamlined and rationalized.

10. Concerns were raised as to the shifting of priority from supply reduction to demand reduction and the low performance in the area of suppression of illicit traffic in section 14. There were queries regarding the assertions of the representative of the Office of Internal Oversight Services that the quality of programmes was affected by the savings measures, and the fact that those measures were heavily concentrated on certain sections of the budget should be part of the findings and conclusions of the report of the Office.

11. Concern over increasing dependency on extrabudgetary resources to implement the regular programme of work was raised. The view was expressed that this practice could not be sustained in the long run, especially if there were substantial reductions in extrabudgetary funding in the future. The sharp decline in extrabudgetary resources, in particular for the International Trade Centre, the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development and the United Nations Environment Programme was noted with concern. The issue needed to be addressed to ensure predictable and secure sources of funding so that the mandated activities would not be affected in the future. The need to monitor carefully the volume and composition as well as the use of such resources to ensure that they supplemented and reinforced the purposes and objectives of mandated activities was emphasized. Concern was raised on the lack of centralized information on resources accruing from trust funds or technical cooperation funds and on the number of posts established against those funds.

12. Concern was raised, in reference to paragraph 58 (c) of the report, as to why resources were not redeployed to high-priority areas or subprogrammes to ensure that such high-priority programmes were fully implemented. It was also noted that departures from programmed commitments were not always fully justified in the report. The authority of the Secretariat to depart significantly from programmed activities approved by the General Assembly was also questioned.

13. The view was expressed that the methodology for reporting programme performance no longer met the needs of the Organization. It was stressed that the work of the United Nations, and its success in implementing mandates, could be derived through a more qualitative analysis of programme performance only.

14. Support was expressed for the observations on possible implications of the introduction of results-based budgeting on performance monitoring contained in paragraph 65 of the report. However, there was also concern that the reference to the concept of results-based

budgeting in the report was rather premature, since it had not been discussed in the General Assembly.

15. The view was expressed that the use of professional work-months as an indicator of resource utilization was inadequate for demonstrating the overall picture of programme implementation, especially with respect to the use and flow of funds. Therefore, the next programme performance report should contain indicative figures on funds used under programmes that have been implemented.

16. As regards subregional cooperation, a question was raised about the selective approach to providing assistance to the Bangladesh-India-Sri Lanka-Myanmar-Thailand Economic Cooperation initiative, which should have been done through a representative regional organization.

B. Conclusions and recommendations

17. The Committee commended the efforts made to improve the quality of the report and to review performance within the context of the medium-term plan for the period 1992-1997. The Committee concluded that in future performance reports, more emphasis should be placed on qualitative analysis to reflect achievements in implementing programme activities.

18. The Committee recognized the need for effective systems at the intergovernmental and departmental levels to ensure that the activities correspond to the mandates reflected in the medium-term plan and programme budgets as well as the need to monitor and evaluate the quality of performance. In that regard, the Committee recommended to the General Assembly that the Secretary-General be requested to submit proposals for consideration by the Committee at its thirty-ninth session on ways in which full implementation as well as the quality of mandated programmes and activities could be ensured and could be better assessed by and reported to Member States.

19. The Committee noted that during the biennium 1996-1997 there were constraints resulting from financial uncertainties as a result of the reduction in resources called for by the General Assembly in its resolution 50/214, the need to address new mandates and the challenging requirements of delivering mandated programmes while simultaneously reforming the structures and the methods of work.

[20. In the context of the high vacancy rate, the Committee recalled paragraph 22 of General Assembly resolution 52/220 of 22 December 1997.]

21. The Committee emphasized the importance of effective central information on extrabudgetary resources. The Committee expressed concerns that extrabudgetary resources were used to supplement activities that should be funded by the regular budget. The Committee noted that the non-availability of required extrabudgetary resources adversely affected programme delivery in certain areas.

22. The Committee noted that it was indicated in paragraph 62 of the report that 57 outputs carried over from the biennium 1994-1995 had been further postposed to the biennium 1998-1999. The Committee agreed to recommend to the General Assembly that it consider the issue in the context of its consideration of the programme performance report at its fifty-third session, based on information to be provided by the Secretariat, including information on reasons for the postponement and the opinion of relevant intergovernmental bodies on the Secretariat's proposal of the deletion.

23. The Committee concurred with the report findings regarding the need for more effective coordination at the departmental and organizational levels as a means of reducing overlap and duplication of programme activities. In view of this, the Committee recommended that overall coordination of the work of the Organization be undertaken when the programmes are formulated.